

**A SERMON GIVEN BY REV. PAUL J. KOTTKE  
UNIVERSITY PARK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**Sunday, July 18, 2010**

**Title:** Why Bother with Religion? and What Did Jesus Teach [Fourth in a series based on Dr. Timothy Johnson's book *Finding God in the Questions*]

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 29:10-14 and Matthew 5:1-10

**Theme:** Why do we bother with the organized religion? Because when all is said and done, it is a way for us to gather in unique community providing support and love.

This is the fourth sermon in this series drawing from the book *Finding God in the Questions*, written by Dr. Timothy Johnson, who for many years was the medical editor for ABC News, including "Good Morning America" and "World News Tonight." We began with affirming the validity of asking questions. Too often people of faith assume that their proper role is just to be obedient and submissive –submissive to God and then, as an extension of God, submissive to the authorities of the Church. This sermon series is built upon the belief that God welcomes our questions – indeed, wisdom often only comes from, wrestling with God if you will, as Jacob wrested with God at a spot Jacob named Peniel. [Genesis ch.32]

The next two Sundays were focused on what could be called naturalism; that is, the affirmation of the scientific principles in the formation of the universe and then – as an extension – the formation of human beings. We affirmed both the scientific principles and that we were created as an extension of God's love grounded in what is called a moral awareness.

The question for this morning is, "Why bother with religion and the bible?" Any cursory glance at history and at the world today and it becomes quickly apparent that often religion breeds conflict, or to say it more accurately, religion is often used to justify violence. This may express itself in the bombastic street corner preacher telling us that we are all condemned. It may express itself in the abuse

of power by a pastor of a local church. It certainly expresses itself in the tragic violence of so-called religious wars. How many people have been killed in the name of God throughout all the major religions, including Christianity? But to be fair, one has to wonder if religion were to disappear from the earth, would the violence also disappear? Or, as is likely the case, would violence simply find another vehicle to justify its hatreds?

To make a case for religion, Dr. Johnson suggests a two-fold awareness: a) religion can be viewed as a vehicle through which spiritual truth is communicated, interpreted, and applied; and b) organized religion provides a unique community – a place to process our spiritual search, to share it and find both challenges and encouragement, a group of people with whom to travel through this earthly journey in some common commitment to God and each other. [p.76]

I concur with Dr. Johnson that organized religion, for all its humanness, is an invaluable vehicle for communicating, interpreting, and applying spiritual truths, generation upon generation. This is what our Christian education and our Spiritual Life ministries are dedicated to addressing for our children – that they learn a foundational understanding that will serve them as they grow into the world of adolescence and young adults, dedicated to our young families and mid-age adults as they learn to navigate the various challenges and demands, dedicated to our senior members as

they learn the wisdom that is found in their transitions of healthy and mobility. So organized religion is about transmitting spiritual insights from generation to generation.

Organized religion is also about building a unique community. In the midst of a time of abundance and ease, in truth, community does not seem all that important and individualism trumps. But in times of transition and of uncertainty, community becomes invaluable. The reading from Jeremiah affirms this wisdom. In this passage, the leadership of Jerusalem find themselves a broken people as humiliated slaves in Babylon. They feel that they are hopelessly cut off from God. And then comes the words of God through Jeremiah, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." [Jer. 29.11] As a gathered community of God, we give each other hope and meaning.

Out of our Judeo-Christian tradition, the Bible carries a central, unifying role, not only in communicating with one another throughout the world but connecting us with our ancestors of old and positioning our faith for the generations to come. John Wesley, the initiator of the Methodist movement, wrote, "If but one book, give me the bible." *Unius libra [a man of one book]* Wesley was one of the eminent scholars of his day, drawing from a wide range of theological and scientific tracts, including many ancient manuscripts of the Eastern Christian traditions. He even had an extensive list of books from which his clergy were expected to be well versed. So it is a mistake to state that Wesley did not value an academic reading of material available to him. Rather, his point was if there could only be one book to choose from, what book would you choose that could carry sacred wisdom from generation to generation?

Dr. Johnson writes,  
*The Bible is the central guide for Christian faith, although various streams of Christianity differ on how*

*to interpret and apply its authority for belief and practice; unfortunately, some extreme groups use the Bible abusively in the name of God. Some people stay away from the Bible because it is confusing or has been used as a weapon or to enforce a doctrine or manipulate others according to agendas we impose upon it. [p.77-78]*

I am one of those people. Growing up, it was painfully clear to me how the Bible was too often used not for self-guidance but as a weapon to inflict judgment on others and justify self-righteousness. I was convinced that if the Bible could be abused in this way then it had no value. My experience of God was always clear and very personal. It was upon this that I ultimately decided that I needed to go to seminary. I did not know what I was going to do with the degree but I knew that I needed to be in the process of wrestling with my faith in an academic setting. So I arrived at The Iliff School of Theology basically illiterate in regard to the Bible. It was Iliff that opened up my love of the scriptures. It was Iliff that allowed me to see and experience that the scriptures really do communicate a radical love of God for all people, with a special calling and responsibility for those who want to be disciples of Christ.

Dr. Johnson calls us to an honest study of the Bible. And I agree. By doing so, you will be able to free it of many of the literalism with which it is so often burdened. He goes on to say that many people act as if the "bible fell out of the sky – God said it, therefore I believe it." [p.77]

The bottom line is that there is not one unified copy of the Bible from ancient time. We have multiple translations, multiple sources, multiple fragments of ancient text. It becomes a full time study of an untold number of biblical scholars to piece together the Bible as we know. What is truly amazing is that there is as much concurrence as there is. But the statement that is so often used ("the Bible is the literal word of

God”) simply does not hold up under honest study. The Judeo-Christian Bible is a reflection of a people for over a thousand years who were trying to figure out their relationship with God and God’s expectations for us. But what becomes clear is that there are many passages within the Bible that are statements of the writers but not of God. Our task? To be able to filter out the multiple passages through which God speaks to us from the passages that are reflections of human prejudice and limited human understanding in a particular social context.

There is also the tendency to separate out the Old Testament as of law and judgment and the New Testament as of love and grace. Again, that is not an accurate reflection of what is actually written. Dr. Johnson writes, “Indeed, there would be no Christian faith were it not for the faith of the Jews, who have taught us all to consider the God who, in the words of the prophet Micah, asks us to ‘act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly.’ And I believe that Jesus was a deeply pious Jew who would be appalled by what some so-called Christians have sometimes done to Jews...” [p. 83-84]

This leads us to the question of Jesus’ sayings in the gospels. There is no evidence that Jesus wrote anything down, even though it was clear that he was literate and trained in reading scriptures. It is also curious that no scribe was assigned to the role of recording his teachings, though such was a common practice in his day. The earliest indication of any of Jesus’ sayings being written down is about 20 years after his death. The four gospels were written anywhere from 25 to 75 years after his death. Add to this there are no existing copies of the original letters and documents. The earliest documents are in fragments and date around 200 to 300 years after his death. So what of Jesus’ teachings were actually his and what were of the early church?

In the early 1900s, Dr. Albert Schweitzer wrote what continues to be a classic book, entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. In the 1980s,

liberal and progressive scholars formed the Jesus Seminars. Of this group, perhaps the most read is Marcus Borg. While this is an on-going endeavor, in the end what is clear is that we really cannot know the man Jesus who walked this earth. What we do know is the man formed by the expectations and faith of the early church.

In the end what is important is how the Jesus of Faith speaks to us and the world of our time. So while there might be disagreements with some of the words attributed to Jesus in the gospel accounts, we can turn to the majority of the sayings because they have proven to be timeless in transforming people’s lives – passages such as the parables and the Beatitudes – “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...” [Matt. 5:3&4]

Why do we bother with the scriptures when we have to work so hard at understanding them? Because they are a unifying source of wisdom for all of Christianity from generation upon generation. They have an amazing ability to allow God to access us in unexpected ways – transformative ways.

Why do we bother with the organized religion? Because when all is said and done, it is a way for us to gather in unique community providing support and love. The Church is a people where a word of hope can stand, even in a hopeless situation. The Church is a people where comfort is experienced even within a deep, heart-wrenching tragedy. The Church is able to provide a sense of the presence of God in a situation where no words can be spoken. Why do we bother with this all too human institution called the Church? Because this is where we experience the Incarnation of God! This is where we find the Source of Life and Love! This is where we are reminded of our baptism into the Covenant of God! Thanks be to God.